

THAT'S THE JOINT!

The Hip-Hop Studies Reader

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Seeds and Legacies: Tapping the Potential in Hip-Hop

Gwendolyn D. Pough

The only thing I'm saying is that the problem is bigger than rap music. If cards need to be plucked, it's not only the rappers who say things some people deem offensive, but also the white financial structure that manufactures and distributes their records. This same structure weaned an entire American generation on sex and violence, so it's little wonder that rappers find such a huge audience hungry for themes involving sex and violence. Rap as a direct reflection of society, will change no sooner than the populace that influences it changes its attitudes.

Cheo Coker, "Who's Gonna Take the Weight?"¹

It's bigger than Hip-Hop, Hip-Hop, Hip-Hop
It's bigger than Hip-Hop, Hip-Hop, Hip-Hop
One thing 'bout music, when it hit you feel no pain
White folk say it controls your brain
I know better than that, that's game

Dead Prez, "Hip-Hop"²

Many would question the subtitle of this article—"Tapping the Potential in Hip-Hop"—specifically the notion that there is indeed any potential to tap in Hip-Hop. Those people would list *ad nauseam* the numerous instances of violence, sexism, and misogyny as well as the glorification of drug use and drug sales described in contemporary rap music. They would list certain rappers who have been arrested for these acts and the recent deaths of young Black male rappers as reason enough to surmise that there is indeed no potential to tap in Hip-Hop. Those same people would probably tell us that this entire generation of young people is a lost cause because of reasons ranging from apathy to selfishness. The Generation X—and more recently Generation O—has been cast aside as the do-nothing generation, a generation of wasted potential. These people probably do not have a clue that Hip-Hop is not rap, while rap is definitely a part of Hip-Hop. They probably do not know that rap is the music and Hip-Hop is the culture.

They probably could not even begin to imagine that some of the Generation Xer's that they have so casually cast aside are far from complacent—they are Hip-Hop activists, Raptivists and about change. In the words of that rap entrepreneur Master P they are "'bout it, 'bout it." And that "'bout it, 'bout it" extends further than clocking dollars, mackin' hos and what have you. That "'bout it, 'bout it" is deeply tied to community building and change. To summarize and condense the epigraphs quoted at the beginning of this article, the negative press and outrage against the music and the culture should be seen as much bigger than anyone could imagine. If we are indeed witnessing a scapegoating or a profiling of minority youth culture, to paraphrase the Reverend Al Sharpton, then it is indeed bigger than Hip-Hop.

As I noted earlier, this movement called Hip-Hop cannot, and should not be reduced to the music that comes out of it. Rap is a part of Hip-Hop, yes, but only a part. Hip-Hop is a state of mind; a way of living and being that expands further than what kind of music one listens to. And there is power there, so much power that some people are scared of it. For example, the largest consuming audience of rap music right now is young White men. Imagine if that same consuming audience became immersed in not just rap music but also a Hip-Hop movement toward change? Can you imagine that? I mean really imagine the future presidents and CEO's of this country's White patriarchal power structure really getting down with a Hip-Hop movement towards change? If you can then you can surely see why the White patriarchal power structure and some White girls too (just ask Mrs. Lynn Cheney and Mrs. Tipper Gore)³ are scared and starting to condemn and scapegoat the music.

If rap music and Hip-Hop culture could do for little Dick and Jane of the 21st Century what freedom movements and antiwar demonstrations did for little Dick and Jane of the 20th century—meaning give them a political awareness and a cause to fight for—then, it's no wonder white folk are scared of rap music. As a youth movement that crosses race, gender, class, and sexuality, rap music and Hip-Hop culture have the potential to bring people together. We know that rap music can get them on the dance floor. The key is to get them moving in the same direction towards social change. Therefore, this article focuses on Hip-Hop as a state of mind, as a way of life that is tied to a youth movement of change—a youth movement that builds on a legacy of movements against oppression in this country. Hip-Hop culture did not just spring up full-grown. It builds on a past. It has a legacy.

In order to get a fuller account of Hip-Hop's political potential, I want to start by making a link between Hip-Hop and the Black Power Movement. The Black Power Movement of the 1970s was a thriving and vibrant part of many Black communities during the time that many of the founders of the Hip-Hop movement were either being born or coming of age. In fact, just as the Black Power Movement was dying out in the mid-1970s, some of the first Hip-Hop jams were being thrown in parks in the South Bronx.

Author Marvin J. Gladney offers some connections between Hip-Hop culture and the Black Arts Movement—which was the artistic arm of the Black Power Movement—in his article "The Black Arts Movement and Hip-Hop."⁴ He recognizes Hip-Hop culture/rap music as the "most recent 'seed' in the continuum of Afrikan-American culture" and notes that it directly follows the Black Arts Movement. He develops three areas of "ideological progression from the Black Arts Movement to Hip-Hop."⁵ And he lists them as "1) the elements of anger and rage in the cultural production of Afrikan-American art in the two movements, 2) the ideological need for the establishment of independent Black institutions and business outlets such as schools and publishing and recording companies, and 3) the development of a 'Black Aesthetic' as a yardstick to measure the value of Black art."⁶ Gladney draws heavily on the theories of Black Aesthetics scholars and critics such as Addison Gayle, Amiri Baraka, Maulana Karenga, Larry Neal, and Haki R. Madhubuti. In each of these critics' work Gladney finds a need to define Black cultural expression that he feels still exists in Hip-Hop.

However, Gladney's clearest connection between Hip-Hop and the Black Arts Movement

occurs in his discussion of “Black rage, anger, and cultural expression.” He finds that just as the Black poets of the sixties used their anger to scream out against the injustice of the status quo, rappers offer, “artistic expression designed to cope with urban frustrations and conditions.”⁷ Others, such as Black Power Movement scholar William Van DeBurg, note rap music as an example of the way “contemporary Black culture continues to reveal its sixties roots.”⁸ Thus, Hip-Hop culture and rap music did not just spring up full-grown; they are seeds rooted in a legacy of struggle against oppression.

Perhaps the most interesting way in which Hip-Hop culture begins to show its sixties roots and indebtedness to the Black Power Movement is in the Black rhetorical qualities they share; which include the Black rage that Gladney discusses in his work and messages and sayings from the Black Power Movement sampled in rap songs. The rage and anger are consistent in the messages and presences of the Black nationalists and rappers. For example, when the Black Panther Party started “policing the police” and shouting “Off the Pigs” thirty years ago, they set the tone for rappers NWA (Niggas with Attitude) who would later shout, “Fuck the Police” over microphones that would be heard by millions. While the rap group did not have a political program such as the one set up by the Panthers—and they were far from being even remotely considered nationalist rappers—their message of police harassment went just as far. In fact, when the Rodney King beating occurred people pointed to them as prophets of the corrupt conditions in Los Angeles police departments. Also rapper Mos Def’s song “Mr. Nigga”⁹ is a 21st century remix of Malcolm X’s reference that in the eyes of Whites, all Blacks from Ph.D.s to pimps are niggers; Mos Def affirms that not much has changed. He raps:

... Checks with O’s o-o-o-o-ohs
 Straight all across the globe
 Watch got three time zones
 Keep a digital phone up to his dome
 Two assistants, two bank accounts, two homes
 One problem
 Even with the o’s in his check
 The po-po stop him and show no respect
 “Is there a problem officer?”
 Damn straight, it’s called race
 That motivate the jake (woo-woo) to give chase
 Say they want you successful, but that ain’t the case
 You livin’ large, your skin is dark
 They flash a light in your face ...

Mos Def most definitely realizes, just as Malcolm X before him—and as the brutal deaths of Black men from Amadou Diallo and James Byrd have shown—in this land we call America being Black negates respect and even the most basic level of human rights.

Another example of the ways in which there are rhetorical links between the Black Power Movement and Hip-Hop culture can be seen clearly in the message rap of the 1980s. There were numerous attempts to bring a political consciousness to the masses via rap lyrics. Artists such as Public Enemy, X-Clan, Paris, KRS-ONE and Conscious Daughters, to name only a few, produced rap songs with political themes of unity, racial uplift, self-definition, self-determination, and Black diasporas connections. There were also large efforts to end “Black on Black” crime and violence with projects such as “Stop the Violence: Self-Destruction”¹⁰ and KRS-ONE’s “Heal: Human Edutainment Against Lies”¹¹ on the East Coast and the compilation album “We’re All in the Same Gang”¹² on the West Coast. Each of these efforts used rap music

as a vehicle to stop Black youth from killing one another and brought together a variety of rappers to get that point across.

Although rap music lacks an actual political program in the same way that the Black Arts Movement was connected to the political Black Power Movement, the messages in some rap songs carry the political themes, such as the ones I mentioned earlier, that the Black Power Movement voiced. In the case of rap music/Hip-Hop culture then, we have the rhetorical messages without the political work. However, the current re-birth of message rap is promising a rise in political consciousness and the possibility of a political project. Rapper Common has traveled to Cuba, interviewed Assata Shakur, and participated in Havana's fifth annual National Hip-Hop Conference and Colloquium, which Castro funds acknowledging "rap music as the existing revolutionary voice of Cuba's future."¹³ In the U.S. several grassroots organizations aimed at helping youth and inspiring consciousness are using rap music and Hip-Hop culture to do so. For example, we have yet to see the result of the Reverend Al Sharpton's Hip-Hop summit that occurred in late October of last year in New York City and the consciousness and change that it may inspire.

Along similar lines of consciousness and change, new rap duo Dead Prez, in a song fashioned after the Black Panther Party's Ten-Point Platform titled "We Want Freedom,"¹⁴ spouts lyrics like, "Tell me, what you gon' do to get Free / We need more than MCs / We need Hueys and revolutionaries" and "see we all want peace, but the problem is crackers want a bigger piece, got it where niggas can't get a piece." They want to use rap as "propaganda" to jumpstart the movement and spread their revolutionary message. Much like the Black Panthers used their revolutionary rhetoric, guns, and customs to initially attract the masses and get them to listen to their politics, Dead Prez sees rap as a vehicle for reaching the people. Noting their connection to the Panthers, the group states, "We're not trying to be what [late Black Panther] Fred Hampton was, although he was a great man. We can't go back to 1969; we're trying to reach into the future. Chanting on the front line is a valuable way to build a movement, but there is a whole other way that has a lot to do with propaganda."¹⁵ And while propaganda may be the most base level of rhetoric, it is a form of rhetoric that the Black Panthers and certain members of the Hip-Hop community share. These new rappers are simply redefining it to fit contemporary times and the Hip-Hop generation.

A metaphor of the connection between Hip-Hop and the Black Power Movement/Black Panther Party becomes apparent when observing the life of former New York Panther Afeni Shakur. Shakur was a member of the Panther 21—the group arrested and indicted in New York for alleged bomb threats.¹⁶ When Huey P. Newton publicly denounced the Panther 21, a split occurred between the entire New York chapter of the Black Panthers and those Panthers with headquarters in Oakland. This split started a war between East Coast Panthers and West Coast Panthers, and it has been alleged that the FBI fueled this war. Many Black Panthers were killed—reportedly by other Black Panthers. Writers such as Hugh Pearson attribute this intra-Panther war with the ultimate demise of the Party.¹⁷ As Afeni Shakur sat in jail awaiting the trial that would ultimately free her, she grew more and more visibly with-child. Upon her release she gave birth to a child who would become one of Hip-Hop's most brilliant rappers—Tupac Shakur. Tupac claimed an allegiance with California gangsta rappers and became integral to the East Coast/West Coast war that would claim his life, the life of New York rapper Biggie Smalls aka The Notorious B.I.G., and possible others.

I think that it is particularly interesting to note that it has been contended that the FBI also had a hand in starting the East Coast/West Coast war in Hip-Hop that eventually claimed the lives of Biggie Smalls and Tupac Shakur. It was a letter from the FBI denouncing rap group NWA that spirited them to success and thus brought about the rise of West Coast style "gangsta rap" and the death of the political rap that was popular on the East Coast at that time.¹⁸ Gangsta rap's tremendous popularity and East Coast rappers' failure to acknowledge the West Coast as

a vital part of the Hip-Hop community caused a great deal of friction on both coasts. However, when we look at the fact that one letter from the FBI stifled the rise of “political/message rap” and ensured an era of gangsta rap, it’s difficult not to also recall Hoover’s declaration that there will not be another Black messiah unless they (himself and the FBI) made one.¹⁹

As Afeni gave us Tupac, the Black Power Movement gave us Hip-Hop. Afeni and Tupac then become the physical embodiment for the link between the Black Power Movement and Hip-Hop culture. Both the Black Power Movement and Hip-Hop culture are grassroots movements started by young Black people—in the case of Hip-Hop culture, young black and Latino people. Both movements are known for Black male posturing and are largely masculine discursive spaces. Both worked to disrupt the status quo on varying levels. And the Black Panthers, as the most productive political unit of Black Power Movement, worked to change the existing order in America. They carried guns to disrupt not only police violence, but also the hypocrisy of the United States Constitution. Members of the Hip-Hop movement started their disruption by making music and creating spaces for themselves when everything around them suggested exclusion. Without access to the technology that had come to define music during the disco era, they created a music that disrupted the exclusionary trend. They created parties in the parks because they were not allowed entrance to the posh New York disco clubs. Disco died, but rap is still here. The Black Power Movement left us with a youth movement called Hip-Hop.

While Tupac and his mother Afeni can be viewed a physical embodiment of the connection between Hip-Hop and the Black Power Movement, they can also be viewed as an example of the untapped potential and unfulfilled legacy in rap music. A lot of people thought that Tupac was going to be the next great Black leader. Although his music was conflicted and he walked a thin line between “positive” and “negative,” Tupac gave some insightful interviews and made startling observations that left a lot of us waiting for the day that he would come into his true greatness and fulfill the destiny of his legacy to the Black Panther Party; we waited with baited breath, but Tupac never did fulfill his destiny. He never did live up to his legacy. Many scholars, writers, activists, and artists have chronicled the unfulfilled potential of Tupac Shakur. Nikki Giovanni a famed poet from the Black Arts Movement wrote the poem “All Eyez on U.” His death spurred many critical articles published by scholarly journals and as well as collection of essays titled, *Tough Love: The Life and Death of Tupac Shakur, Cultural Criticism and Familial Observations*.²⁰ Public intellectual Dr. Michael Eric Dyson also touches on the untapped potential of Shakur in his controversial book *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King Jr.* The book is controversial because among other things, Dyson compares the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to rappers such as Shakur. Dyson writes:

If we acknowledge that King was an extraordinary man despite his faults, perhaps we might acknowledge that some of our youth have the same potential for goodness that King possessed. (We must remember that if King had died at age twenty-five like Shakur, or twenty-four like the Notorious BIG—or after his first fame as a boycott leader at twenty-six—he might now be remembered as a promising leader who was shown to have borrowed other peoples’ words and wives, infractions that in the absence of his later and greater fame we might be less willing to forgive.) In the process, some of these youth, by identifying with King, might rise above their limitations they might also see that they can remake their lives and place their skills in the service of social transformation.

The major point of Dyson’s text is that we should begin to take a more critical look at history—a look that does not glorify the past and demonize the present—a look that is not nostalgic but critically conscious. Only then can we begin to establish real change. The truth is that Tupac and to some extent the Notorious BIG had potential that they did not use wisely.

Their music touched the lives of many on a daily basis. Imagine if their messages toward change had been more constant and steadfast. I'm by no means saying that either of these rappers would have been the next Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and, I don't think that is what Dyson is saying either. I think that Dyson is calling for a mass project of critical reflective consciousness that doesn't look backwards nostalgically for a glorious past, but that looks back in hopes of learning things that would help the youth of today reach their full potential.

In the words of political rap group Dead Prez quoted at the beginning of this talk—"it's bigger than Hip-Hop." Hip-Hop did not spring up full-grown—and it was not created in a vacuum. The legacy of this country is the legacy of the Hip-Hop generation just as much as the legacies of the leaders who worked to change this corrupt society. To paraphrase or shall I say signify on the great poet Langston Hughes' "I Too Sing America," "Hip-Hop Too Raps America." The negative things we see in rap music and Hip-Hop culture are the negative things we see in this country—in this society—if we are honest. Hip-Hop can give us the mirror to the ills of society and to tap that potential we need to look in that mirror and work to change the things we see. The negative legacy of America is what we have to work against. Malcolm X warned us about chickens coming home to roost and we watch them come home time after time, in Columbine on urban streets with drive-bys, all over this country. Think about it and do something.

Notes

1. Coker, Cleo, *Essence Magazine*, August 1994: 62–64.
2. Dead Prez, *Let's Get Free*. Loud Records 2000.
3. Tipper Gore came to national attention in 1985 for helping to launch the Parents Music Resource Center, a group that crusaded to put warning labels on explicit albums. This group comprised primarily of the wives of prominent politicians and business executives testified in front of the Senate Commerce Committee; then-Senator Al Gore was a member of that committee. Lynne Cheney in September 2000 testified before the Senate Committee of Commerce, chaired by John McCain, decrying rapper Eminem as "misogynistic."
4. Gladney, Marvin J. "The Black Arts Movement and Hip-Hop." *Callaloo* 29 (1995): 291–301.
5. *Ibid.* at 291.
6. *Ibid.* at 291.
7. *Ibid.* at 292.
8. Van DeBurg, William L. *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965–1975* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992 at 307
9. Mos Def, *Black on Both Sides*. Rawkus Records, 1999.
10. Various artists, *Stop The Violence: Self-Destruction*. Jive Records, 1998. \$600,000 in proceeds from the record was donated to the National Urban League. See also: various artists, *Hip Hop for Respect*. Rawkus Entertainment, 2000. Rappers, Mos Def and Talib Kweli instituted this project to address the deaths of Amadou Diallo and Tyesha Miller.
11. The purpose of H.E.A.L. was to counter organized lies perpetrated through the educational system, politics and religion that contribute to social problems. The 1992 H.E.A.L. statement, "Before you are a race, a religion or an occupation, you are a human. HEAL YOURSELF"
12. West Coast Rap All-Stars. *We're All in the Same Gang* (12" single). Warner Brothers Records, 1990.
13. Cepeda, Raquel, "Breath Free: In Search of a Definition of Freedom." *Source Magazine* April 2000: 134–138
14. Dead Prez. *Let's Get Free*. Loud Records, 2000.
15. Solomon, Akiba. "Dead Serious." *Source Magazine* April 2000: 150–152.
16. Accused of planning to bomb public spaces, Afeni Shakur, mother of rap artist Tupac Shakur, was a member of the Panther 21 and was imprisoned on more than 200 charges before she was eventually acquitted.
17. Pearson, Hugh. *The Shadow of the Panther, Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America*. New York: Addison-Wesley, 1994.

18. Dated August 1, 1989, regarding the album, *Straight Outta Compton*. From Milt Ablerich, Assistant Director, Office of Public Affairs—U.S. Justice Department, Federal Bureau of Investigation to Mr. Oui Man-ganialie, National Promotions Director—Priority Records.
19. J. Edgar Hoover called Martin Luther King, Jr. “the most notorious liar in the country.” Accusing King of being a communist, Hoover authorized the wiretapping of King and in attempts to discredit King, spread stories about his sex life.
20. See also Jones, Jacquie, “Time on the Cross,” and Keeling, Kara, “A Homegrown Revolutionary?: Tupac Shakur and the Legacy of the Black Panther Party.”